

...Celebrating people and images

By Jane Mote



Documentary story-telling needs to stand out from the crowd and mean more than imported and formatted TV. The rise of TV, digital media and cinemas across Africa has opened people up to new stories. But how many show stories that are really central to lives versus wallpaper or bubble gum that may provide a moment of amusement but are as instantly forgettable as a Big Mac burger?



[Jane Mote | LinkedIn](#)

IT seems a long time since I met Femi Odugbemi at Sheffield Doc fest in the UK last June. Here he is with the Director of One World media -- a charity I'm a trustee for. He lit up the room on our panel discussion about establishing a Fair Filming protocol to help ensure foreign crews respect the talent and cultures within the countries they fill.

The idea for Fair Filming came to me after nearly a decade of supporting Ugandan filmmaker, Carol Kamyia, in training young Ugandans to give them the tools of the documentary trade. Carol had trained on a scheme I'd set up at BBC London to try to attract more diverse talent into the media and knew that similar training in Uganda would have an even bigger impact.

After many visits to Uganda I had an uncomfortable feeling that some Western filmmakers were continuing with the traditions of their countries' colonial pasts -- this time mining stories like minerals -- for their own benefit and not respecting the legacy of their actions or giving anything back. They'd arrive in this sub-Saharan country with pre-conceptions that made the truth a casualty of their ambition.

Images are powerful and wrongly used they can create false stories that shape generations of views. Take this image from the British Queen's visit to Uganda in 1953. A barefoot girl, beautifully dressed, is chosen to offer the Queen a bouquet of flowers. This image was beamed around the world and heralded as wonderfully happy moment.

But it took over 50 years to get the true story out there.

Bayata had spent her whole adult life ashamed of what she agreed to do that day. A UK production team making a documentary about the Queen's tour of the Commonwealth sensibly asked for research help from one of the few Ugandan production companies and that's when they finally unearthed the truth.

Bayata came from a wealthy and well-connected family and had been bought a beautiful new dress and matching shoes to wear for her big moment. But just as she was about to step on to the tarmac, she

was told to remove her shoes as the event producer thought it would make a better picture to see a barefoot African girl offering the Queen flowers.

The documentary series *On Tour with the Queen* wasn't designed to change the world but it changed this now older woman's life finally allowing to express her distress about succumbing reluctantly to colonial coercion.

We have a responsibility to document the world honestly and to ask the questions that get us nearer to the truth. I passionately believe everyone should own their own stories. They are who we are. And they can change the world.

Stories are as central to our lives as eating and sharing food.

They are part of what defines us and our cultures.

They are nourishment for the human spirit.

I don't want to be over-run by American fast-food chains that feed you bland, easy-to-forget food dressed up in a foreign brand.

It's not what Nigeria is about. It is not what any country outside of the US wants to be known for.

Documentary story-telling needs to stand out from the crowd and mean more than imported and formatted TV. The rise of TV, digital media and cinemas across Africa has opened people up to new stories. But how many show stories that are really central to lives versus wallpaper or bubble gum that may provide a moment of amusement but are as instantly forgettable as a Big Mac burger?

Was all this media opportunity created to be filled with imported cheap formats or even cheaper local imitations?

If that was the case I'd say what a waste. In the millions of hours of video content shared every day there has to be an important role for important stories.

I believe there is a real opportunity for YOU to take control of your stories to define your own culture as you would have done in generations gone by with the added benefit of having even greater impact because of the spread of social media.

I BECAME a journalist because I believed information was power and I have always been incredibly nose-y. I'd grown up with photojournalism that opened my eyes to the world with great storytellers like John Pilger and Don McCullum. When I moved from newspapers into Television (via radio) my stories had more impact. Images stick in peoples' consciousness and beaming them into living rooms embeds ideas into their psyche.

After 16 years at the BBC and several more running commercial TV channels I had the opportunity of a dream job – heading up American Vice President Al Gore's documentary channel Current in the UK. Al Gore capitalised the documentary as *Agent Provocateur* using the form to publicise his thesis about global warming in *An Inconvenient Truth*.

The documentary had a huge impact although -- and please don't quote me -- it wasn't the greatest piece of filmmaking. Too many words and graphics and viewers being talked at. For me, Documentary needs to elucidate issues through human stories and strong images. They have more impact this way and don't risk preaching or lecturing which gives the genre a bad name!

NOW the title for this session is *Documentary as Agent Provocateur*, so I hope you'll indulge me for a while in discussing some of the documentaries that I feel live up to this title and have changed the world for me. By the end of this festival I hope to have 20 or more African-made documentaries to be able to add to my list.

Documentaries done well are the noblest of purposes for the media. They require courage, heart, rigour and patience and the simplest ones are the hardest to make. And for me truth is stranger and more compelling than fiction.

Some documentary filmmakers have blazed a trail for you to examine and decide whether to follow.

Taking on justice systems is hard but winnable through documentary. Errol Morris's *The Thin Blue Line* was the first reconstruction documentary of its kind. Looking forensically at what led to the false imprisonment for murder of a young Texan drifter who hitched a lift when he ran out of petrol, Morris proved that even younger driver who'd picked him up on that fateful evening was the actual killer and the police had done their jobs badly. An innocent man was released because of the film which felt like a live detective drama.

Decades later I was involved with the making of another documentary film about the American penal system. For me this was an even more shocking story. The story of the Angola 3 -- three black inmates convicted on minor charges at a very young age into one of the Deep South's most notorious prisons. They were accused of killing a white prison guard but all the evidence was circumstantial. And they spent over 100 years between them in solitary confinement as a result. Yes Solitary. Robert King was released but the other two remained incarcerated. The filmmakers persuaded the victim's daughter to go on to camera to plea for their release.

They carefully unpicked and discarded the evidence against them but still they remained. What changed my world was seeing these men's dignity. How they bore the strain of solitary. The injustice of the divided society that led them to be there in the first place. How they never gave up. With Samuel L Jackson as the voiceover, the film was used to raise consciousness in the fight for their innocence and release and has led to a re-examination of penal policy.

Then there are the documentaries that take on multi-national companies – the borderless states that control our lives.

When Josh Fox went home to Pennsylvania for a holiday he saw a letter on his parent's table from a company asking to buy some of their land so they could extract natural gas using a method called fracking – where the earth is shattered apart using high pressure water and a mixture of chemicals releasing the gas inside layers of rock.

Josh had never heard of this before and had never made a film in his life. He started a journey that was going to change his life and that of 1,000s and caused the multi-national gas companies a lot of aggro and money. In *Gasland*, Josh sets off with his banjo and travels across America uncovering a story that people felt too ashamed or disempowered to tell themselves. He finds water tables contaminated beyond return, people with mysterious illnesses and homes where when the water from taps bursts into flames because of the amount of toxic pollutants in the groundwater.

This film has helped pre-warn people to ask more questions before signing over their land for short term gain. And its hard-hitting message stuck with me. A natural gas company is now seeking exploration rights near my home in Southern England. Thanks to one man, his banjo and curious mind I am ready for the fight.

It's even harder to access stories when the danger is hidden deep in the heart of one of the most protected areas in the world. *Virunga* is set in a national park in Eastern Congo and a world UNESCO heritage site – home to a small colony of mountain gorillas -- a source of sustainable tourism. The production team worked with national park authorities who had been powerless to raise awareness – with the national park director being shot several times and many of his men dying as they try to protect this rare area. Allegedly against all legal precedence it emerged the government has allowed SOCO, a British-owned company, to explore for oil, threatening the sensitive ecology of the park and the gorillas. Hidden cameras help to reveal what was happening behind closed doors.

The film has rightly won awards internationally. The story is told through the characters on the front line -- the wardens and parks staff who risk their lives daily. It intersperses grainy hidden camera footage with rich, beautiful panoramic views of the lush rainforest and tender moments with the gorillas -- innocents at the centre of the row.

* *Jane Mote*, director of *BeechtoBeach*, delivered the keynote on *Can Documentary change the world*, at the 6th iREP Festival.
